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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on the increasing numbers of handicapped individuals attending colleges and universities in the United States. The increase is attributed to federal legislation, pressures from self-help and advocacy groups, marketing efforts by universities suffering from declining enrollments, and increased recognition of the institutions' social mission. Learning-disabled students represent the newest and fastest growing handicapped constituency at colleges/universities. The number of handicapped students attending postsecondary institutions in Canada is likely to rise, in part due to two important pieces of legislation: Ontario Bill 82: An Act to Amend the Education Act, 1974; and Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as set out in The Constitution Act, 1982. Critical issues which thus need to be resolved include: architectural barriers; attitudinal problems of university personnel, especially toward students whose handicap is "invisible"; the need to fairly and accurately assess the presence of learning disabilities and the student's ability to cope with the academic demands of higher education; and the need to determine what constitutes reasonable accommodations in teaching and evaluation of learning-disabled students. (JDD)

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POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES
FOR EXCEPTIONAL PERSONS:
NORTH AMERICAN TRENDS

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Post-Secondary Programmes and Services for Exceptional Persons*:

North American Trends

Marc Wilchesky, Ph.D., C. Psych.

Introduction:

The original intent of the author was to: 1) review the incidence of physically disabled and learning disabled individuals within Canadian institutions of higher education and, 2) discuss issues of concern with regard to the availability of programs and services specifically geared to the student with physical or learning disabilities within these institutions. This has proved to be an almost impossible task due to the lack of information on the topic as it pertains to post-secondary institutions in Canada. A computer literature search, personal rummaging through volumes of journals related to the topic, and discussions with numerous Directors of Student Affairs and Coordinators of Services for the Disabled at several universities within the Province of Ontario have resulted in the realization that national data simply do not exist on this topic, or at the very least, are extremely well-hidden. Although most Canadian universities have developed some services for the physically disabled, there does not appear to be any centralized data source regarding the nature and extent of such services. Similarly, there are no reliable data readily available describing the number of handicapped students currently enrolled in colleges and universities across Canada, nor the nature of their needs.

* The term "exceptional persons" was chosen by the organizing committee of the symposium. In fact, the term "exceptional" is not generally used in the post-secondary sector. As used in this paper, the term is synonymous with "handicapped" and "disabled". Further, when not otherwise specified, the terms handicapped and disabled refer to individuals with either physical or mental impairments, including but not limited to, the following; blind or visual impairment, cerebral palsy, deaf or hearing impairment, diabetes, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, orthopedic impairment, speech impairment, and various forms of specific learning disabilities.

It should probably come as no surprise that there is indeed such a scarcity of data in this area. Services to disabled individuals in post-secondary institutions are relatively new in both the United States and Canada. Until recently, secondary students with special needs were rarely encouraged to continue their education beyond high school. As a result, only the extremely motivated, highly perseverant, and usually intellectually gifted physically disabled student would consider attempting to enrol in a college or university. Learning-disabled students were even less likely to be university bound, since the prevailing attitude until very recently has been that university-level education was beyond their intellectual capabilities.

Well, as the song says, "the times they are a-changing." The rise in the number of handicapped individuals attending colleges and universities in the United States during the past 10-15 years could be described as meteoric. Concurrently, programmes and services to meet their special needs have been developed and continue to grow. It is important to note that specific Federal legislation introduced in the United States is likely the primary factor responsible for the dramatic change in the number of students with special needs attending American college campuses.

In the remainder of this paper, the author proposes to: 1) review the factors resulting in more disabled individuals attending post-secondary institutions in the United States, 2) contrast these factors with recent developments in Canada and, 3) discuss the implications for post-secondary institutions in Canada, particularly with regard to provision of programmes and services for learning disabled university students.

The Experience in the United States

Whenever major educational, social, and/or political changes occur, one is usually safe in assuming that the changes cannot be attributed to a solitary event. In the case of the increasing enrollment figures for handicapped individuals at American colleges and universities during the past decade, this assumption likely holds true. Certainly pressure from self-help and advocacy groups has played a major role in opening the doors to institutions of higher education for individuals with various handicaps. Also, the projected declining enrollment in higher education during the 1980's as a reflection of the declining birth rate in the 1960's has likely forced university administrators to search for "non-traditional student markets." Enrollment is vital to the financial health of universities and will be a key factor in keeping pace with the projected increase in operating costs (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984). Physically disabled and learning disabled individuals represented a relatively untapped reservoir of potential students to fill the projected gap. On a more humanistic note, one would hope that some college and university officials have become more aware of abiding by the "social missions" of their respective institutions. Rather than simply paying lip service to these missions, one would expect that some have become committed to providing more opportunities for students with special needs to obtain higher education.

Recognizing that many factors were involved, most observers

point to the passage of two laws as the major turning point for handicapped individuals wishing to pursue post-secondary education (e.g. Mangrum & Strichart 1984; Nathanson 1983; Scales 1986). The first was United States Public Law 94-142 (PL94-142), initially passed in 1975, with implementing regulations appearing in the Federal Register in August 1977. Known as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, this law required that all handicapped children be given the opportunity to receive an appropriate education through the secondary level. In addition, the "least restrictive environment" stipulation of PL94-142 has resulted in an increasing number of handicapped students being educated alongside non-handicapped high school students. One could reasonably speculate that the combination of improved awareness of the special educational needs of handicapped students by school personnel and the increasing fraternization of handicapped and non-handicapped students at the secondary level could possibly result in handicapped students developing similar postsecondary educational aspirations and expectations as do their non-handicapped peers.

While PL94-142 does not apply to college level education, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which became law in May 1977, does have direct bearing on post-secondary education. This regulation states:

"No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States shall solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." (PL93-112, 1973, material in public domain).

Handicapped individual is defined as any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Learning is considered one of the major life activities, and specific learning disabilities is listed as one of the impairments covered in Section 504. Subpart E of Section 504 specifically prohibits discrimination against qualified handicapped persons in postsecondary educational institutions in admissions, recruitment, and treatment after admission. Virtually every college and university in the United States is covered under Section 504.

Scales (1986) points out that under Section 504, access to a college or university education based on one's academic ability has become a right for disabled students, rather than a privilege dependent on the attitude of a particular admissions officer, department, or college administration. In the years immediately following the passage of Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, there has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of students attending American colleges and universities across the United States. Marion and Iovacchini (1983) reported that most if not all post-secondary institutions in the United States had made concerted efforts to comply with the legislation. However, they cautioned that due to limited

financial resources most administrators and governing boards have chosen to provide only the minimum required by law. Still, the available data clearly point to the positive effects of the legislation on providing handicapped individuals with more access to higher education. In 1978, approximately 2.9% of American college freshmen were self-identified as being physically handicapped (Lawrence et al 1981). By 1982, Astin et al (1982) reported that this had increased to 5.4%. By 1984, the percentage had climbed to 7.3% (Note 2). This represented an increase of approximately 150% over a six year period.

While it is difficult to gauge the effects of the legislation on particular sub-groups within the total group of handicapped individuals, there is a growing body of data which suggests that learning disabled students represent the newest and fastest growing handicapped constituency who will be attending college and university in the next decade. Fielding (1981) argues that learning disabled individuals are perhaps the most undereducated and underemployed, yet high potential persons within our society. He claims that over 16 million adults with learning disabilities in the United States are potential consumers of post-secondary educational services. In 1985, the United States Department of Education reported that 1, 811, 489 learning disabled students were enrolled in special education during the previous school year (material in public domain). White et al (1982) reported that 67% of those students who had been diagnosed as learning disabled while in elementary or secondary school planned to continue their education beyond secondary school. This contrasts with a study done only two years earlier which reported that 22% of learning disabled high school students expected to graduate from college or university (Deshler et al 1980). Most recently, in a publication by the HEATH Resource Centre, data for the 1984 academic year indicated that 1% of all college freshmen in the United States self-identified as being learning disabled (Note 3).

The Canadian Context

While statistics and trends in the United States do not necessarily have direct application to Canada, there are several interesting parallels which may be drawn. As in the United States, pressure groups, declining university enrollment, and "social missions" of universities have all played some role in what appears to be a gradual increase in enrollment of handicapped students in post-secondary educational institutions. However, it has only been within the past year that similar legislation to PL94-142 has come into effect in the Province of Ontario, and that Section 15 of the Constitution Act of 1982 has become law in Canada. These two important pieces of legislation closely resemble the type of legislation which has led to the dramatic rise in enrollment for handicapped students in the United States. In the Province of Ontario, Bill 82: An Act to Amend the Education Act, 1974 was proclaimed in December 1980, to take full effect by September 1985. This provincial legislation

guaranteed that,

"...all exceptional children in Ontario have available to them...appropriate special education programs and special education services without payment of fees by parents..." (Education Act, Revised Statutes of Ontario, 1980, Section 8(2)).

As with PL94-142 in the United States, this legislation should theoretically result in improved educational services through secondary school for students with special needs within their local school boards. Students with special needs should be better prepared for college level study while at the same time developing increased expectations and aspirations to continue their education beyond the secondary level.

Section 15 of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as set out in The Constitution Act, 1982 came into effect in April 1985. This legislation states:

"Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability." (Sec. 15(1), Constitution Act 1982, material in public domain.)

While this legislation does not refer specifically to post-secondary education, there are at the very least some legal questions likely to be addressed by the courts with respect to the obligations of universities and colleges vis-a-vis admissions and evaluation procedures which do not unfairly penalize disabled individuals.

It is still too early to discern whether or not the legislation discussed above will have the same effect as comparable legislation in the United States. However, there are some early indications that post-secondary institutions in Canada should be preparing for a steady, and perhaps dramatic increase in the numbers of handicapped individuals interested in pursuing higher education. At York University in Ontario, the number of self-identified handicapped students attending the university has risen from 19 in 1977 to 114 in 1984 (Note 1). The number of self-identified learning disabled students has increased from 5 in 1980 (the first year for which data are available) to 55 as of December 1985. York University has recently received a grant to operate a 3-year pilot project which will investigate the effectiveness and feasibility of a comprehensive programme for university students with learning disabilities. Indications are that there is a tremendous degree of interest in the programme and enrollment of qualified learning disabled students is expected to dramatically increase over the next three years.

If data from York University may be taken as an indication of trends at other post-secondary institutions in Canada, one cannot help but wonder how much more dramatic an increase may occur during the next decade now that Bill 82 and Section 15 of

the Constitution Act have come into effect.

Future Implications

If one accepts the notion that there is likely to be an increase in handicapped students attending post-secondary institutions in Canada, there are some critical issues which need to be resolved. The success or failure of programmes and services aimed at supporting students with disabilities will likely depend on whether or not university faculty and administrations are able to resolve some or all of these issues.

Generally, handicapped students are confronted with architectural and/or attitudinal barriers within the post-secondary setting. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the architectural barriers (e.g. lack of adequate ramps, doorway access, washroom access, elevators, etc.) which need to be resolved by post-secondary institutions. Without minimizing their extreme importance, these architectural barriers are likely more easily changed than attitudinal barriers. Nathanson (1983) notes the necessity of taking into account the attitudes and possible biases of all members of the post-secondary community in the process of integrating the disabled into the educational mainstream. Perhaps the most difficult attitude to overcome is the notion that all that matters is one's particular label. This often results in warped thinking which characterizes all individuals with the same label (e.g. "The Blind", "The Deaf", "The Paraplegic") as having the same needs, interests and abilities. Well-intentioned but misguided university personnel assume weaknesses even when they are not present. The tendency is to either withdraw totally and claim the disability is simply too much to handle within the university, or to adopt a "rescue fantasy approach", whereby the student is viewed as defenseless and in need of "protection". Neither tendency is particularly helpful to individuals with handicaps. As Newman (1976) states,

"One cannot escape the impression that handicapped students do not desire any prominence that would make them stand out among the student body...(They) are already highly sensitive to their being different...(and generally would) wish these differences to be obliterated rather than featured..." (Newman, 1976, p. 196).

Nathanson (1983) concludes that it is inevitable that staff and faculty of colleges and universities will form opinions and hold attitudes toward disabled people since we are all products of our culture. He argues that we must work toward developing an accepting attitude toward human differences and strive to view each disabled person as an individual, not as a representative of a particular label.

As mentioned earlier, students with learning disabilities

are increasingly attending universities and colleges, and this trend is likely to persist over the next decade. While general attitudes toward the handicapped may apply to the learning disabilities group as well, the fact that their handicap is "invisible" poses some additional difficulties for them. Although there are no conclusive data at present, it would appear that faculty attitudes toward the learning disabled may be even more difficult to influence than toward students with more visible handicaps. Harrison (1982) reports that professors are often unable or unwilling to acknowledge students' learning disabilities and generally think that these students should not be allowed to attend college. At one university in Ontario, a survey conducted in 1985 investigated attitudes of faculty toward visibly handicapped and learning disabled students. In a personal communication with the author, the Director of Counselling Services at that university revealed that there was a fair degree of willingness among faculty to accept physically disabled students in their classes. However, 90% of faculty respondents did not believe that learning disabled students would be able to handle the course content (the Director of Counselling Services requested anonymity).

In addition to the problem of faculty attitudes toward learning disabled students, at least three other major issues must be addressed in this area. First, reliable methods need to be developed to fairly and accurately assess the presence of learning disabilities. There is still quite widespread disagreement regarding the precise definition of "learning disabilities". Several definitions have been proposed by various authors and interested professional groups. However, a consensus regarding definition has yet to be achieved. Psychological assessment methods have primarily focussed on children with learning disabilities. As a result, a great deal of work remains to be done in the development of valid psycho-educational assessment instruments with adult populations.

Once the identification of learning disabilities has been addressed, the ability of the learning disabled student to cope with the academic demands of the college or university needs to be assessed. Harris (1985) notes that there has been little communication between post-secondary and secondary educational institutions which often leads to problems at the admissions level. He argues that high school transcripts are often invalid and/or highly misleading because they fail to indicate the degree of remedial assistance provided to the student and/or reflect highly sympathetic grading practices. But for the sake of the learning disabled student and the integrity of the post-secondary institution, it is extremely important to accept only those students who truly qualify for admission. By so doing, college and university faculties and administrations can be assured that their educational standards are not being compromised. At the same time, the learning disabled student who undergoes a fair, but rigorous assessment of his/her academic ability can be assured of a reasonable chance of success in the post-secondary setting.

The third major issue to be addressed must be to determine carefully what constitutes "reasonable accommodations" in both

teaching and evaluation of learning disabled students. Goodin (1985) surveyed 586 professionals involved with handicapped students at the post-secondary level regarding 27 statements drawn from the literature on academic adjustments. He reports widely different opinions about various possible adjustments, with highly positive attitudes towards such things as permission to: respond orally to essay exams, dictate test answers to proctors, take a proctored exam in another room, take extra time to complete an exam, tape record lectures. More negative attitudes were expressed towards the following: exemption from academic probation and dismissal policies, allowing proofreaders to substitute higher level vocabulary in a draft, allowing proofreaders to reconstruct the draft. In any case, the issue of reasonable accommodations must be addressed in order to ensure once again that both the integrity of the degree-granting institutions and the learning disabled student remain intact.

Conclusion:

An attempt has been made in this paper to outline the trends which point to an increasing number of handicapped students in post-secondary institutions and in particular to highlight the trends with regard to learning disabled students. Estimates of the incidence of learning disabilities in Canada generally range from 5% to 10% of the school-age population. Until recently, very few learning disabled students were encouraged to attend college or university. Even if one assumes that only a proportion of learning disabled students will be qualified to attend post-secondary educational institutions, this still represents a relatively new constituency in the post-secondary setting. A number of issues have been discussed in this regard. However, perhaps the most crucial question has not yet been raised. That is, to what extent will society demand that colleges and universities provide "special education services" for students with learning disabilities and/or other handicapping conditions? As McLoughlin (1982) writes,

"Contemporary college instruction is not geared toward the individual student, but at the transmission of a delineated amount of information in a specific area of discipline to large numbers of students." (McCloughlin, 1982, p. 244).

Given the above, many students with special needs will likely require some form of remediation, tutorial and/or other support help at the post-secondary institution. To what extent should universities be responsible for providing such services?

In closing, I quote from the basic principles enunciated in the Ontario Ministry of Education Special Education Information Handbook 1984 (Note 4).

"All persons have a right to education, society has an obligation to provide an opportunity for education through

schooling...

Learning is a lifelong process, and every person should be given opportunities to acquire the attitudes, skills, and habits that will enable him/her to derive maximum benefit from the learning opportunities he/she encounters in life..."(p.1)

How far should one extend these principles? The task of deciding the type and degree of support required by the student with special needs is often difficult at the primary and secondary levels of education. It becomes even more complex when meshed with the question of the responsibility of a college or university towards its student constituency.

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